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SUBJECT: 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF 1991 "COUP": APATHY, PROMISE  
OF NEW GENERATION?

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The fifteenth anniversary of the August 1991 "coup" passed with little fanfare. There were no official events, and the Russian population greeted the anniversary with apathy or political antipathy. Despite concern in some circles over increasing restrictions on personal freedoms, the majority of Russians appear more preoccupied with the issues that have an impact on their daily lives. Many liberals view this retrenchment as a natural if unwelcome political backlash against the 1990's, predict a long political evolution back to the ideals imperfectly realized in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, and look to a new generation of activists to repack democratic values discredited during the Yeltsin era. END SUMMARY.

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APATHY TO ANTIPATHY  
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2. (U) In the lead-up to the anniversary, Izvestia published an interview with two of the participants of the August 1991 coup, who recounted the emotional excitement and public involvement critical to thwarting the rollback of political reforms initiated by Gorbachev. This sentiment was echoed by Igor Bunin of the Center for Political Technologists who commented in Rossiskaya Gazeta that the events of August 1991 represented a moment of "communitas" -- an emotional political moment which only comes once in a generation.

3. (U) Opinion polls conducted prior to the anniversary on attitudes toward the coup captured the apathy now prevalent among the populace. According to a Levada Center poll, conducted July 14-17 across 46 regions of Russia, 13 percent of Russians surveyed believe that the coup plotters were right, 12 percent endorsed Yeltsin, and 52 percent concluded both sides were wrong. A further 23 percent had no opinion. Another poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation found that 67 percent of Russians surveyed between 18 and 35 could not say whether things would have been better if the coup had succeeded. While most people remember what they were doing when they heard the news, few remember the specifics of the events themselves, apart from the loss of life. They are also hazy on the reasons: some recollect that it was an internal power struggle, many no longer recall what Gorbachev sought and nor what the "putchists" advocated. A notable 15 percent in the Levada poll had confused the events of August 1991 with those of October 1993.

4. (U) Public indifference to the 15-year anniversary and resentment of the social dislocations of the 1990's also was reflected in the number of Russians willing to mark the occasion. Events on August 19 started with a rally of Communist Party supporters in front of the Lenin Museum, whose participants -- including the errant tourist or two -- numbered less than a 100. On August 20, 200 people

representing both "Democrats" and Communists" commemorated the killing of the three men crushed by Soviet tanks on August 21, 1991, and a march to the White House on August 22, National Flag Day, organized by the Union of Right Forces (SPS) in support of Yeltsin's victory over the hard liners, garnered about 1000 supporters.

15. (SBU) Antipathy to the series of events that precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union remains politically acceptable, even fashionable. In a press release, Duma Speaker Boris Gрызлов emphasized the United Russia position that the coup was a "tragic page" in Russia's history, which should be commemorated in order to remind Russians of the dangers of a weak government. Chief editor of the radical nationalist paper Zavtra Alexander Prokhanov, who supported the State Emergency Committee's (GKChP) actions in 1991, told us that the failed coup was a tragic day that people now associate with the fall of the Soviet Union and, therefore, nothing to celebrate. He noted many Russians had believed that it would usher in a "democratic heaven". Instead, rehashing the universal refrain here, Prokhanov described the aftermath as a period of rampant crime, instability, and the rise of the oligarchs. The average Russian, he concluded, longs for a return of Soviet orderliness.

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Liberals Resigned  
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16. (SBU) Every revolution, Echo Moskvyy editor Aleksey Venediktov noted to us, has its Thermidor. The retreat from those democratic ideals, expressed but imperfectly realized in the 1990's, was a natural phenomenon, he maintained, even if the erosion of those values over the last 15 years was greater than he would have predicted. Carnegie Center's

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Lilia Shevtsova reinforced to us that the mixed emotions surrounding the anniversary of the coup reflected the fact that all Russians were stripped of something dear in the 1990's -- not just grandiose notions of empire, but immediate family connections, with relatives scattered across newly recognized international borders. Venediktov did not rule out a more generous post-mortem on the coup that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, but argued that this historical revisionism would come only after the emergence in Russia of a more assured and economically secure middle class -- the culmination of a long and measured political evolution.

17. (SBU) The silver lining to the backlash against the 1990's, Demos Center Tatyana Lokshina insisted, was that human rights activists were being forced to reevaluate their message to the Russian public. Many activists, she told us, simply cannot adapt to the new language of Putin's Russia and to the fact that there is little admiration among the Russian public for the names and tactics of Soviet-era dissidents. Trying to promote civil liberties, given the apathy of the public and the complacency generated by growing economic prosperity, requires smart image-making and activists who have a better understanding of Russian concerns. The message, she maintained, should focus more on freedom and less on democracy, which she said -- echoing Prokhanov -- evokes images of Yeltsin, the rise of oligarchs, the non-payment of wages, the unavailability of social services, and the deterioration of order. Both Shevtsova and Lokshina pointed to the rise of grassroots organizations -- automobile societies protesting corruption, environmentalists focused on Lake Baikal, and citizen's groups outraged over housing scams -- as evidence of a new generation of civil society leaders. (In an aside, Shevtsova noted the disdain sometimes evident among the older, more established, and foreign-funded NGO's toward these less organized and less overtly human rights-oriented social movements.)

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Comment

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18. (SBU) The August 1991 coup and the collapse of the Soviet Union that it precipitated is an event which Putin described as the "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the Twentieth Century" -- a statement that resonates with the Russian public. The majority of Russians -- as the polling indicates -- are caught between a nostalgia for the lost superpower status of the USSR and a grudging recognition that the changes which followed after August 1991 offer the prospect for a better life. Hence the ambivalence with which Russians greeted the anniversary and the enormity of civil society's task in revitalizing Russian support for democratic values.  
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